

CONSUMER ADVISORY

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By Attorney General Tom Miller

Prevent Home Repair Scams and Disputes

Spring is on the way, and that means home-improvement fraud soon will be in full bloom. We see it every year. Home repair needs accumulate over the winter, and some homes suffered significant damage from this year's winter storms. Spring home improvement fraud is as common as the return of migrating birds.

Home improvements can be costly, and home-improvement fraud is always one of the most common consumer complaints. Examples include local contractors who ask for substantial up-front payments, do little or no work, and never finish the job right. Some contractors quote a price and then unfairly charge a lot more as the job progresses. And some are the old "by-night" traveling scam-artists who base neighborhoods looking for potential victims, knock on their door, and offer to make driveway, paving or roof repairs.

Follow these tips to avoid being taken by home-repair scams and disputes:

X **Don't fall for the "knock-at-your-door" scam** where someone shows up out of the blue and says your driveway needs repaving or your house needs new shingles. and they just happen to have materials left over at a big price discount. They are sure to take your money and run, without doing the job at all or doing it right.

X **Check out contractors** before you sign a contract or pay any money. Request local *references* -- and check them out. Contact the Attorney General's Office to see if it has *complaints* (call 515-281-5926, or 888-777-4590.) Contact the Better Business Bureau (515-243-8137, or www.bbb.org.) Check to see if a contractor has been sued by unsatisfied customers -- go to www.iowacourts.state.ia.us.

X **Get several written estimates, choose the best, and get a contract in writing.** Before any work begins, agree on a *written contract* detailing work to be done, responsibility for permits, costs, and any other promises. Ask for a copy of the contractor's liability insurance certificate. Put start and completion dates in writing, and consequences if the contractor fails to meet them. (Example: the contract could be nullified if the contractor doesn't start on time.) Note, if you sign a contract at your home, in most cases you have three business days to cancel.

X **Avoid paying large sums in advance if you don't know the contractor.** If you need to make a partial advance payment for materials, make your check out to the supplier *and* the contractor. Insist on a "mechanic's lien waiver" in case the contractor fails to pay others for materials or labor.

For more information or to file a complaint, contact the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division, Des Moines, Iowa 50319. Call 515-281-5926, or toll-free at 888-777-4590. The web site is: www.iowaAttorneyGeneral.org.

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